

Message Text

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH

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1. THE TIME HAS COME ONCE AGAIN TO ASSESS THE STATE OF PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH. ACCORDINGLY, WE REPORT THAT, WHILE IT IS ADMITTEDLY DIFFICULT TO MAKE A DEFINITIVE ASSESSMENT, OUR JUDGEMENT IS THAT HIS HEALTH HAS DETERIORATED FURTHER AND HAS REACHED THE POINT WHERE HE CAN NO LONGER EITHER TRAVEL ABROAD OF APPARENTLY, GIVE MAJOR SPEECHES.

2. DURING ASSISTANT SECRETARY ATHERTON'S CALL ON PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA ON FEBRUARY 28, HE LOOKED WORSE THAN I HAVE EVER SEEN HIM. HIS EYES WERE PUFFIER THAN USUAL, ESPECIALLY THE LEFT EYE. THEY RETAINED THE GLAZE THAT HAS BEEN SO LONG APPARENT, EVER SINCE DOCTORS STARTED PUMPING HIM FULL OF SEDATIVES (FOR HIS INSOMNIA), TRANQUILIZERS (PRESUMABLY FOR HIS NERVOUS CONDITION) AND OTHER MEDICINES FOR HIS ARTERIOSCLEROSIS. SINCE HIS ILLNESS OF LATE DECEMBER AND EARLY JANUARY, WHICH WAS PUBLICLY DESCRIBED AS A COLD, THE PRESIDENT HAS SOMEWHAT ALTERED HIS NORMAL ROUTINE, INDICATING THAT HIS ACTIVITIES HAVE BEEN CURTAILED TO SPARE HIM EXCESSIVE STRAIN. THIS HAS INCLUDED READING PREPARED SPEECHES ON OCCASIONS WHEN IN THE PAST HE ALWAYS WOULD HAVE SPOKEN EXTEMPORANEOUSLY AND HIS FAILURE TO DELIVER ANY SPEECH AT THE CENTENARY

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OF THE COLLEGE SADIKI WHERE HE AND MOST OTHER GOT LEADERS

WERE EDUCATED. IT APPEARS THAT HE WILL ALSO MAKE NO SPEECHES IN CONNECTION WITH TUNISIA'S 20TH ANNIVERSARY ON MARCH 20.

3. BOURGUIBA HAD LONG PLANNED TO MAKE A STATE VISIT TO THE SOVIET UNION THIS SPRING, A VISIT WE UNDERSTAND THE SOVIETS WERE EAGER TO RECEIVE. THE PRESIDENT HAS NOW DECIDED DEFINITELY TO CANCEL THIS VISIT BECAUSE HIS DOCTORS HAVE DECIDED THAT TRIPS THAT CROSS EVEN ONE TIME ZONE WOULD SERIOUSLY DISRUPT HIS STRICT REGIME OF DIET AND REST. BOURGUIBA HAS ALSO CANCELLED A STATE VISIT TO IRAN WHICH WAS TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE AT THE END OF THE SOVIET VISIT.

4. ON THE OTHER HAND, WHILE THE SOVIET AND IRANIAN VISITS ARE OFF, BOURGUIBA CONTINUES A RELATIVELY ACTIVE SCHEDULE OF VISITS WITHIN TUNISIA. HE IS NOW TOURING GOVERNORATES IN THE SOUTH AND IS SLATED TO MAKE A SIMILAR TOUR IN OTHER AREAS AS PART OF MARCH 20 INDEPENDENCE ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. THESE TOURS ARE APPARENTLY ACCEPTABLE TO PRESIDENTIAL PHYSICIANS SINCE STRICT CONTROL CAN BE MAINTAINED OVER THE SCHEDULE. ALSO, THE PRESIDENT DERIVES PSYCHOLOGICAL INVIGORATION FROM EXPOSURE TO APPARENTLY ADORING CROWDS AND THESE TOURS, IF NOT HECTIC, HAVE A GENERALLY BENEFICIAL EFFECT ON HIM.

5. ALTHOUGH BOURGUIBA HAS LOST MUCH OF HIS ONCE RENOWNED INTELLECTUAL CAPACITY, HE CONTINUES TO ACT ALERT AND VIGOROUS IN HIS OUTWARD PROJECTIONS. IN HIS MEETING WITH ASSISTANT SECRETARY ATHERTON, HE MADE NO PROFOUND STATEMENTS BUT HIS COMMENTS WERE PITHY AND TO THE POINT. YET HE STILL COULD NOT AVOID HIS SENILE PENCHANT FOR REMINISCING AND OCCASIONALLY WANDERING A LITTLE OFF THE SUBJECT.

6. OUR CURRENT ESTIMATE OF PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH, THEREFORE, IS THAT IT HAS TAKEN A DOWNWARD TURN THAT HAS FURTHER LIMITED HIS ABILITY TO REMAIN IN EFFECTIVE COMMAND. HIS ADVISERS NO DOUBT WILL INCREASINGLY SHIELD HIM FROM THE PUBLIC--EXCEPT FOR CEREMONIAL AFFAIRS-- IN ORDER TO AVOID HIS MAKING FURTHER POLICY STATEMENT GAFFES. THE PRESIDENT IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE EXERCISING HIS CONSTITU-

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TIONAL POWER TO APPOINT AND REMOVE MINISTERS BUT THE CURTAILMENT OF HIS NORMAL ROUTINE WILL GIVE HIS PRESENT MINISTERS GREATER FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT. NO ONE BELIEVES HE WILL EVER VOLUNTEER TO RETIRE FROM THE SCENE GRACEFULLY, ACCEPTING THE ROLE OF TITULAR PRESIDENT. INSTEAD, AS HIS SON INDICATES PRIVATELY, "THIS IN FACT IS WHAT WILL HAPPEN GRADUALLY." BY THIS HE MEANS THAT THE PRESIDENT WILL IPSO FACTO BE FORCED BY HIS HEALTH TO FUNCTION AS CHIEF

OF STATE LESS AND LESS, AND OTHERS, SUCH AS THE PRIME
MINISTER IN PARTICULAR, WILL HAVE TO MAKE MORE OF THE
IMPORTANT DECISIONS. MEANWHILE, TUNISIAN LEADERSHIP
WILL- IN CONTRAST TO THE "BOURGUIBISM" OF OLD- BE TAKING
FEWER, IF ANY, RISKS IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA AND WILL
AVOID, AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, MAKING WAVES WITH ARAB AND
NON-ALIGNED STATES.

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